Eta Carinae by Magnipotence

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Summary:

(10 Years Later AU) – After escaping from a decade of Alien Slavery, Vlad Masters returns to Earth the broken shell of a man. Ten years a slave, ten years a monster - This is a story of learning to how to be human again.

Relationships: Danny Fenton & Vlad Masters
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Eta Carinae

Chapter 1: A Drink To Death

X

Make sure my glass is full.
Let's crash and see how fast we go.
He took a shot and held his breath.
I'm gonna drink myself to death

.□A DRINK TO DEATH□, That Handsome Devil

X

“What is a human?” A creature whispered; its voice the streams of stolen starlight that adorned its shapeless form. “Are they made from monsters, like you and me?”

Vlad attempted to speak, but found his voice lost, swallowed up by the pressing darkness of the galaxy around them. Before him, the faceless creature gave him an inhuman laugh, tittering and violent in response to his silence.

Its’ visage flickered, twisting into the soft face of a child; eyes burning green, silver hair glowing beneath the star’s love, looking the same as he had ten years ago. This ghost child – A false god burnt in the zealous idolatry of a man long dead.

He’s forgotten so many things; forgotten so many souls, spirits and dreams, but this was the very one he had wished to forget the most of all.

“Did you make the choice, or did they make the choice for you, Vlad Masters? Did you choose this?”

And yet, the familiar face. The familiar voice. Those clenched fists, filled with the destiny to rip out his heart, again and again. (and

again, and again, and again and again –)

“Will you let them make you into a monster?” The boy whispered; the stars lost in his eyes. “Or will you fight to be human?”

He narrowed his eyes; words lost in his throat, as the young spirit smiled in a deceiving manner.

Who are you?

But without a word, the creature shifted again, taking on a different form. His form – the visage of his own human skin, staring back at him. Blue eyes, grey hair. Another ghost, another damned ghost, wearing a man’s skin, pretending to be human.

I am you.

A violent torrent of energy slammed into his chest, and a startled gasp of pain escaped from his heaving lungs. At his waist, the black rings flickered to life, forcibly turning him back into his human self, and the creature laughed as he went sent hurtling violently into space. The lack of air sent his body into a frenzy, and in his struggle to keep living, he wondered momentarily if this was the beginning of the end.

“Will you learn to be human?” The being asked him; its voice growing quieter and quieter as he was sent careening into the unknown. “Or will you perish as the monster you think you are?”

As the emptiness swallowed up what little life he had left, the creature disappeared in a torrent of stars, and he felt the darkness of space descend upon him at last.

X
It'll eat your insides.
Your brain burns and your skin dries
Bumping through the alleys like you think you're still alive.
I wanna hold you closely, I wanna smell your sweat.
I wanna drink to myself to death.

X

When he came to, eyes blurred and head pounding, the world around him was screaming.

“--- fell from the sky!”

“Did you see --- come from?”

“Oh God, --- ambulance! Somebody call an Ambulance! There’s --- attempt on Third Street! Oh my God ---“

For a moment, rationality lost in the clamor of voices and confusion, he thought that he was back in the Colosseum, back in the ring where they pitted creature after creature against him, back in the chains that he broke *free* from –

“Did anybody get on that video ---“

“ – the fuck is wrong with you? He just tried to kill –“

“His eyes are open! Sir, can you – me, sir? Sir!”

Something jostled his shoulder, and his body exploded with pain, gaping out a choked gasp as it ricocheted through his body. The hand squeezed, and he felt the world beginning to go dark at the edges. He couldn’t move his body, limbs too heavy to lift from the concrete floor, and he realized with a delayed dismay that something was horribly wrong.

“—he’s alive! Oh my God, he’s alive! Quick, somebody – “

“They’re on the way! Hang on sir, we’ll get you to a hospital –”

The hands let go of him, and against the frantic shouting of the voices around him, he can hear the fevered whisper of the one nearest to him.

“Come on, stay with me. Don’t die on me yet. The ambulance --- be here soon. They’re really good at response times, they’ve had --- be

with all of the ghost attacks over the years, --- main part of town, and oh man, stay with me man! --- open okay? Can you tell me your name?"

Name? What was his name? His name was Plasmius. Plasmius, space nomad, ghost hybrid. Plasmius the Monster. Plasmius the Destroyer. Murderer, Monster, Madman, Slave #10899, ruler of the Col – No. No, that's not correct. (A dead ghost, a dead ghost, a *dead ghost* –) That was the past, that's who he was, and he was that for far too long.

He was no longer any of those things.

(But he wasn't even sure who he was now; who this battered and broken body belonged too, as he bled out against the pavement.)

He had been fighting since he had left the earth. That wasn't who he was anymore (but who was he? What was he? Why *was he still alive* –)

"Sir? Sir, please say something!"

"My name is…." His voice was hoarse, scratchy and stiff from disuse. He can feel his eyes start to drift, and the inky darkness in the corners of his mind was encroaching quickly, creeping along like a thief in the night. He doesn't even know if the words he speaks are real, slipping into the dark waters surrounding his thoughts. "…is …." But words failed him,

And for a second, his vision cleared, hazily revealing a human staring down at him, tears streaming down their face as they attempted to frantically communicate something to him. The words were lost in the static, flowing in and out as the blood roared in his ears, and his head was screaming out a song of pain in tune with the panic of the world around him.

But, it was a human. A human was helping him.

He was home.

X

There will be no candles; there will be no romance.
I will be alone – we will not hold hands.
There will be no toasting; there will be no romance.
You are young,
I am an old man.

X

When he awoke the second time, the world was quiet, save for the small beep of a heart monitor. It unsettled him – the unearthly quiet, creeping in at the edges, deafening in its entirety and his body tensed, preparing for a fight –

The feeling of pain shot up his side, and he gasped as every nerve burned with vicious sear before slipping back into the dull ache that quivered beneath the surface. The collection of electronic equipment he was attached to made a series of aggravated beeping sounds somewhere to his right, increasing the severe pounding of his headache, and he felt the urge to rip apart every single machine in the room. He raised his fist to grab at the wires, to rip them from his skin, but the pain returned tenfold, and his arm slumped back uselessly against his side.

“Your bones are broken.” A voice told him, distorted but hauntingly familiar in its tone. “All two hundred and six of them. The doctors are entirely baffled as to how you’re not a quadriplegic with the nature of your injuries. In fact, they don’t know how you’re even alive… Then again, despite having revealed your nature to the world in the past, they are unaware of your true identity, but that will change very soon. After all, Vlad Masters, the Wisconsin Ghost, has been gone for a very long time.”

There was a haze of blankness that threatened to envelop him, curling itself around his neck to whisper sweet nothings in his ear, luring him back to the abyss of nothingness from which he crawled away. With an effort, he turned to his head to find the source of the

voice, finding the floating figure of a small blue ghost, leaning against a clock-adorned staff in the middle of his hospital room. And then, when the figure changed the moment they made eye contact, shifting into the form of a violet-clad adult, red eyes gleaming beneath a zigzagging scar – Vlad remembered exactly who he was dealing with.

And yet, there was something else; the nagging feeling that something was wrong. (A memory that wasn't his, a dream that wasn't a dream; something different, something precious that wasn't meant for him to see, telling him a secret meant to stay asleep.)

"You are…Clockwork," he said roughly; voice struggling and guttural. To his growing frustration, he was struggling to speak, but it had been so long. So long since he spoke his own mother tongue. He wasn't used to this voice, this language, and every word he spoke felt wrong to say; English stiff and foreign on his tongue. "To what do I….owe the pleasure?"

"I have come to check up on you." The ghost said grimly. "I was originally banned from interfering with your timeline by the Observants, following your less than stellar record with them, but it's thus been rescinded."

All words that registered, but they were void and meaningless to him. Clockwork's words were structured and informal, all emotion gone from his voice, but something lingered at the edges. Vlad struggled to voice his response. "…. How long have I been gone…?"

The ghost shifted into the form of an old man, and he wandered closer, coming to loom over the hospital bed. Up close, his scar was less a memory of a wound, but rather a brand, carved deep into the cool hue of his skin. As the ghost peered upon him with glistening crimson eyes– he could hear the soft tick of Clockwork's working grandfather clock, humming out a song from within its glass cradle embedded deep in the ghost's chest.

"You have been gone ten years, Vlad. It is 2017." Clockwork told him calmly, quietly, almost too soft to hear amidst the other sounds. "But you knew that, didn't you?"

He had known, he had always known, but it was still crushing, still heartbreaking. Keeping track of time had kept him sane, it kept him aware, as the chains rattled and the screams drowned out all else, but it was still a hard pill to swallow. A decade of his life gone, trapped in the memory of a bad dream that he couldn't wake up from. Ten years since he was stranded in space, ten years since he was enslaved by an alien race, ten years since he could call himself a *h u m a n* –

Suddenly, Clockwork's voice cut through his thoughts. "I am…sorry, Vlad. Truly, I am. This is not the future I would have chosen for you."

A bitter laugh bubbled in his throat, but the witty spark to engage in banter was gone. He felt hollow, as if someone had carved out all his insides and left a rotting carcass in his place. It never changed. It *never changed.*

The knowledge that something else could have been done, that something could have changed to prevent it all from happening will haunt him for the rest of his life, just as it had with his accident, just as all things in his life had gone.

A never-ending, unchanging burden; the guilt that festered like a cancer, devouring happiness in its wake. The knowledge that it could have been different; the knowledge that it could have *been better*.

And yet, instead of the blind anger that would have consumed him, it filled his bones with exhaustion. The truth left him feeling like a shell, like a ghost, clutching for something to drown himself in, but he was so *tired* – tired of living in the past; tired of living in the dead dream that had long disappeared.

"We've…never met before this. But why do I know you?"

"We have met before, and we will meet again." Clockwork told him as his long spindly fingers fiddled with the clock adorning his staff. "One might say that…only time will tell." Making private joke that was only funny to him, the ghost let out a rare laugh at his own secret.

(*How does he know these things*?)

In his wanderings through the Ghost Zone, Vlad had heard stories of the Master of the Time, but they were only mere stories, and there was nothing concrete. The watchdog of the Observants, a near omnipotent specter with complete mastery over Time and all its perks. He had searched, lured in by the notion of becoming his own God with the Time Staff and Infiniti-Map, but it was a fruitless venture and he inevitably lost all interest. It had become another legend, another story lost to the pages of history– as if all trace of the entity's existence had been wiped from the Ghost Zone itself.

But there, buried there, amongst the history of his years, there were memories – memories of a different world, a different reality, a different life, but his life nonetheless. It was almost as if –

He felt his vision start to blur again, and the sound of rushing blood filled his ears once more. Clockwork was trying to say something to him, shifting through each of his forms, as he spoke hurriedly over the noise of static that steadily began to drown the world out.

"– A second chance. A second time --- in the current time – for the past cannot be changed and the future cannot be made if the current time is not maintained. -–Here for a reason – You came home for a reason --- it is up to you what will this reason will mean."

The darkness lingered at the edges, and he struggled to remain awake, trying to think of a question before he lost the last of his consciousness again. From above him, a young Clockwork gave him the ghost of a smile before disappearing in a flash of bright light and the swing of a clock's arm as the portal struck midnight.

In the moments before he lost consciousness, as the hospital room door slammed open and the room filled with unfamiliar faces and doctors' scrubs, the last thing he heard was the faint sound of laughter in the distance as it turned into a vicious sob.

X

And if I pass out wake me up
I may be drunk but I'm not drunk enough

and everything keeps fucking up
we were nice together weren't we once?
I'm drunk but I'm not drunk enough.
We were nice together weren't we once?

X

But in the dream, Plasmius awaited him.

Blood stained hands; glistening white teeth dripping with red. Carved into his skin, a brand – a language he did not speak, did not want to speak, but he knew what it meant (he would never forget what it meant).

Fight or die.

Scarlet eyes stared out at him from abyss; the eyes of a stranger, these stolen jewels plucked from the sarcophagus of the Gods, a power within that was unlike anything else in this world. And yet, it was home; it was familiar; it was unforgettable. This was a ghost – a spirit of something once living, that was no longer, but it would not disappear. It was trapped here, between this world and the next. A true eternity.

"*I cannot die,*" the ghost whispered with mirth, throwing out his scarred arms; a singular chain rattling, screeching as breaking glass in the silence of the dead, "*but you can never live."*

You are dead, Plasmius.

A reminder, a painful memory, a dead dream. Do dreams ever truly die?

A ghost, a shell of something that once was. Above him, the galaxy is filled with ghosts, haunting the memory of the star left behind, trapped in their place as the quasar devours all that's left behind. A graveyard; a silent burial ground that swallowed all those upon fell upon its endless tomb.

He was meant to die here in this endless abyss.

But he was still alive. After everything, after all the terrible things he had done, he was still alive, why was he *still alive* –

"*Will you let me out?"* Plasmius murmured; an unfamiliar voice that was not his, was not him. "*I am you, and you are me, but I am not free. Are you?"*

A young boy screaming, calling for his dead father, as the universe wept and snuffed out his fears. (But no death was peaceful, no death was painless, and the children cannot be saved.)

"You will never be free."

And Plasmius laughed, an echoing sound that rattled the stars from their graves and sent the heavens crashing down upon their sorrows laid out for all to bare witness to.

"*We will see*."

X

Make sure my glass is full.
We can last till I'm the last to know.
From now till nothing's left,
I'm gonna drink myself to death.
X

Still a prisoner, just a different cell. Still a slave, just a different master.

The view outside his hospital room was beautiful – an open bay window that looked down upon a lush courtyard, filled with the flittering of dying leaves and the radiance of the trees changing color while the Earth prepared for Winter. As beautiful as it was, however, it still did not overshadow the fact that he was a prisoner here, and he was trapped in this godforsaken and sterile nightmare until the doctors took pity upon him and let him go home.

He looked out at the courtyard again. Wherever home was, that is.

Still a prisoner, just a different cell. Still a slave, just a different master.

The third time he had woken up – a novelty that had soon wore itself short upon realizing that his bones were still broken – he had been in a different room in a different hospital in a completely different part of the country, and Clockwork was nowhere to be found. At some point following his run in with said entity, his identity had been leaked, and the hospital had been overrun by those seeking answers for the events of the Disasteroid and his subsequent disappearance. By that point, they were forced to move him to a private facility owned by VladCO, who to his immense surprise was run by no other than his sister – Anna Masters.

(Of course, that was a name she no longer went by, and the rest of the world was unaware of the true nature of their relationship. As far as civil society was concerned, Anna Marie Mick was a bleeding heart who wanted to get in good with the former boss. A fact in itself that was somewhat true, and therefore not totally 'a lie', so there was no reason to say anything to indicate otherwise. It worked out for everyone.)

Following the events of his 'Grand Master Plan', he was surprised that VladCO remained intact, given its less than charitable creation through the misuse and abuse of his ghost powers. Then again, despite having revealed his true nature to the world, there were still a few secrets he kept close to his chest, and there were few alive who knew the whole story of his claim to fame. Even his sister had been in the dark about his half-ghost side (and subsequent rise to power) until the rest of the world had learned the truth, despite having had been the only person who came to visit him following his accident.

And for a moment there, he would admit that he had utterly forgotten about the existence of his sister. To be fair, they had not been speaking with one another during Vlad's last year on Earth, as she had grown tired of his obsession with the Fentons and had wanted him to move on with his life. Of course, he was indignant that she would even attempt to suggest such a thing, and he had her subsequently removed from his will, where he then named Daniel Fenton as legal heir to VladCO and all related properties. Unfortunately, he never had it legally changed – he had just drafted it up on his laptop in a fit of rage after a glass too many – and she

must have remained as subsequent heir to the company following his disappearance.

That, or she changed the will on him after having her removed from it. He would be willing to accept either answer.

Once he had remained coherent enough to carry on a conversation, she told him that the massive leak of his identity was at the result of his "Return To Earth" going viral across something she called the 'social media platforms'. Upon bugging her for elaboration, she showed him multiple videos of what could have only been him being launched from the sky and hitting the Earth at a velocity no human could survive, despite having been in his human form throughout the minute something long video. Apparently, in an unfortunate stroke of luck, he had crashlanded in Amity Park the day before the tenth anniversary of the incident, and it had thrown the city into a frenzy, turning them desperate to learn who survived the fall from the sky.

From there, it didn't take long for the populace to discover *who* and exactly *what* he was, and suddenly – Vlad Masters was back in place as 'Public Enemy #1'.

It was almost funny to think what the influence of a 2017-styled social media would have had in his heyday as an anonymous half-ghost. Danny Fenton would have never been able to keep his secret for as long as he did if society had been as nosy as it was now. It was surprising that he made it as long as he did in the first place. The boy had never been subtle, and his attempts to hide were often pitiful.

To his own shame, he didn't forget to ask about the dear boy. Danny Phantom was still in a player in this game, but Anna was tight lipped on the subject, so he didn't push it.

Over the duration of his wretched hospital stay, his sister visited on a near constant basis, but the subject of 'Danny Fenton' became the perpetual elephant in the room that neither one of them wanted to be the first to bring up. He had spent too many years thinking of Danny Fenton, too many hours toiled over for a mere boy, over what was and what could have never been, and his sister seemed invested in talking about anything and everything that wasn't ghost related.

Unfortunately, the longer he rotted away in that hospital room, the less they had to talk about, and the problem of Danny Phantom became more and more daunting.

And Vlad knew that she would not ask the questions that lingered; the questions that he knew he didn't have the heart to tell her, the questions that she didn't have the courage to ask.

[*What happened to you?*]

While the days blended into weeks and the sense of time began to slip, the loneliness of the hospital room began to dig at him more than he was willing to admit. He actually looked forward to seeing his sister, even if they were spending more of their time in increasingly awkward silence, but she become the constant in his life. She brought him just about a new novel with every visit, as there were a variety of series that he had missed in his absence, and it filled in the hours between sleeping and contemplating escape. She had tried to get him into watching television as well, but what little television he had caught on the hospital television had left a bitter taste in his mouth, leaving the news his only viable source of lackluster entertainment. (However, a man could only handle so many news story covers about his 'Escape from Space' and the subsequent hunt for the private hospital he was staying at.)

His sister had given him something called an 'IPad' as well, but the frivolities of the modern internet could only entertain him for so long before his mind wandered towards looking for terrible things. He didn't want to read about the Fentons, and the Danny Phantom Online Forum was a sad and terrible place to ever visit. It told him nothing that he had already known, and it was a treacherous place that had taken a leaf out of his own book in regards to spying on the boy. A very sad, very pitiful leaf from a very sad, very pitiful book that should have been burned long ago.

Instead of the vague sense of pride he would have experienced in the past – the thought instead left Vlad with a queasy feeling in his gut. One could call it a 'feeling of guilt', but he did not feel those kinds of things. Emotions, at their core, were a sign of weakness.

(Still a prisoner, just a different cell. Still a slave, just a different

master.)

However, it was in moments like this, where he ran out of things to read and the IPad was dead, that it became immensely difficult not to jump from channel to channel in search of something to stave off the boredom. If anything, it was to provide background noise and keep away the silence that permeated the dreadful place. The comforts of the past, no matter how mundane, sometimes became too hard to ignore. He flicked the television on.

"*MAN OR MONSTER? GHOST OR HUMAN? These are the questions that we want answered*!" Next.

"*Over the last few weeks, there have been reports on the return of the notorious Wisconsin Ghost, whose human identity is none other than missing billionaire Vlad Masters, previous owner of VladCO, former CEO of DLAV, and former mayor of Amity Park, Ohio. Here, in this recent video, it shows –*" Next.

"*He should have stayed in space, where he belonged! He's an evil man who –*" Debatable, but next.

"*Buy BOX GHOST PACKAGE PROTECTION! All packages are under the lawful protection of the Box Ghost and all Box Ghost Affiliates! BEWARE the unprotected PACKAGE –*" Oh for fuck's sake.

"*The video is clearly a fake. There is no way anyone could hit the ground that hard and live! Doesn't matter if they're a ghost or not – physics are still applicable, even to the dead! He should be dead after an impact like that! It's a fake!"*

"Can you kill a ghost? Find out –"

Someone grabbed the remote from his hand, and the television abruptly flipped off.

"The Doctors told me that it won't be long before you can be discharged."

His sister's voice dragged him from his thoughts, and he tried to hide his startled reaction. In this safe, clean and quiet environment, he found himself slipping further and further, becoming at ease in the

bubble that kept him from the outside world. However, time was becoming lost to him, and he barely knew what day it was anymore.

He was becoming soft, and it enraged him more than he realized.

“How long?”

Anna gave him a frown. “They’re not entirely sure, given your incredibly fast healing, but they were looking at the end of this week, following the results of your physical therapy evaluation. Unless you want out to be out sooner, and are willing to take physical therapy at home.”

“Whose home?”

“Mine, yours, it doesn’t matter. Michael is more than alright with having you stay with us, and there is more than enough space. Although, I understand if you want to be alone after all this. Some of your homes….are still in functional order, if you are interested since you haven’t brought it up until now. As well, I can understand entirely if you wish to live somewhere entirely else than your previous residences.”

“I do not mind your company, Anna, but I would like to…go home. Tell me – are any of my homes still livable? I can’t imagine there’s been much upkeep since I left.”

Anna frowned again, and Vlad wondered momentarily if it was a genetic trait shared between them.

“Your castle in Wisconsin, despite the lawsuits and government interference trying to proclaim otherwise, is still in your name, still in one piece and inhabitable, but it will be crawling with paparazzi and reporters given your….high-profile return. Your second castle was destroyed, however, and the Mayor’s Mansion is not viable for obvious reasons. The mountainside estate is also still yours, but it isn’t inhabitable at the time being, so I’ve scheduled its remodel in the event you wish to get away from society. That will take a few more weeks, however, given the…ghost problem that the area possesses.”

That last comment got his attention. “Ghost problem? What ghost problem?” The spirits of those dead animals had long been taken care of, so it must be something else infesting the area. Something would have to be done about it eventually, but for the moment, he was filing it under ‘Later Problems to Solve’ for later reflection. The Mountainside Portal had long been disassembled, but the tear in the fabric between worlds would still be weak enough to rip back through.

“A lot has changed in regards to ghosts… The gap between worlds is growing thinner, and the infestation is getting…worse, if I’m putting it lightly. Even with the new laws, there are too many ghosts attempting to make their way through, and not enough people hunting them. And well, those who do hunt them can only do so much by themselves.”

Vlad closed his eyes before turning to look outside the window at the courtyard below. “Do ghosts make you uncomfortable, Anna?”

“They don’t make me uncomfortable,” she said gruffly. “They make me nervous. There’s a difference. I can’t trust humans as it is, so what’s there to trust in a ghost?”

“Do you trust me?” He asked with a tight lipped smile, and he watched as a variety of different emotions flitted across her face before a stone wall of apathy slammed down in its place. Certainly not the best question to ask, but there was no point in beating around the bush any longer – not if he planned on getting out of here in a timely fashion.

He, after all, was a master of making people uncomfortable in order to get what he wanted.

“Do I have any reason not to?” She asked quietly before stopping to look at something in the far corner of the room. “Will you answer a question for me though? And will you answer it honestly?”

“That depends. In return for my answer, will you answer two of my questions?”

Anna glared at him. “Two questions?”

“You asked me to answer *honestly*, my dear sister. That costs extra, even for loved ones.”

“Fine.” She sat down in the chair next to the bed and forced him to make eye contact with her, staring him down until he kept her gaze. In that dim moment of silence, he realized that Anna had aged more than he originally thought. There was a sense of doomed mortality in her eyes while the crow’s feet in her face flew farther with every crease of her forehead. The fringe of her once dark hair had turned almost completely grey, broken up by the shots of pure white, and it was thin, trailing down her back in lanky curls that had long lost their luster. She had always been his older sister, and despite her tyrannical rule in their childhood - they weren’t that far apart in age.

Like a lightbulb going off, the question she sought the answer to came unbidden in his mind, and he realized too soon what the question was. He should have known.

“Vlad…Vlad, when did you stop aging?”

His fingers tightened against the fabric of his hospital bed in reflex. The dull ache in his wrists was almost entirely gone, but they felt stiff and heavy against the covers. It was taking him too long to heal completely. “When did you notice?”

Anna narrowed her eyes at him before answering. “Before we stopped talking, before you met…. the boy for the first time. I realized you had turned forty something, but there wasn’t a single wrinkle on your entire face. I had thought it was strange, but I had chalked it up on the account of the accident and its unpredictability on how it would affect you. And now, ten years later, you look the same as you always have looked, if not younger. It’s because of your ghost half, isn’t it?”

“I cannot tell you exactly when it started,” Vlad murmured quietly, “but it was about ten, perhaps fifteen years after the accident before I realized that something was…off. This…this is what I will always look like.” There was more to it than that, but he did not elaborate further, and she did not ask for more.

“The grey hair always threw me off. I should have realized a long time ago that something was amiss.” She gave a weak smile before it

faltered. “You weren’t the same.”

“It was the accident that changed my life. It changed me. For the better, for the worse. Now, my two questions then?”

“Proceed on, I suppose. I’m surprised you told me as much as you did. What do you want to know?”

“The first, of course, is about whatever you’ve been avoiding bringing up this entire time. Did something happen, Anna?”

“How do you know something happened?”

“You are not denying it otherwise, and you have been incredibly nervous these last couple of visits. *Did* something happen, sister dearest?”

Anna blew out a frustrated sigh, fingers twisting together in her lap. “The Fentons….The *Fentons* – ” The name murmured like a curse, as if it was a taboo that left a nasty taste in her mouth, “–got a hold of me. They want to talk to you.”

“Ah. I see.” He returned nonchalantly. “Now, by talk, do you mean the Jack Fenton definition of talking, which primarily consists of ‘tearing me apart, molecule by molecule’? Or the Maddie Fenton version, which comes in the form of a baseball bat aimed for my kneecaps? Or perhaps, it’s the 2 for 1 combo?”

“Neither, but I wouldn’t put it past them.” She said with a grimace before continuing. “They wanted to put you under observation following your release from the hospital. They believed that you needed to be….watched. They were concerned, and they offered their ‘help’. I told them that your care and supervision would be handled by our medical team, and they haven’t said a word to me since. And they aren’t the first ones to come looking for you… The Guys in White, the Government, has been snooping around as well. There are rumors that they want to take you to trial, for what happened in 2007, but there’s been no conclusive answer thus far, and no one will tell me anything else.”

“I see,” was the only answer he gave and it felt sufficient, but the

look on his sister's face said that she disagreed with him. "Well, it is good to know that my popularity has reached an all-time high. It's almost like I never left at all. Now, for my second question – A much easier question to answer in my opinion, and on a far more pleasant topic. What strings can you pull in order to ensure that I'm discharged today?"

A brief look of shock flitted across her face. "You want to leave today? You've only been here six weeks –"

"I am tired of this hospital," he told her truthfully. Beneath his pillow, there were carefully calculated plans for escape. Half-ghosts healed quickly, and while there was still that sense of concrete coagulating in his bones, he was becoming restless. "I would like to go home."

"To your castle?"

He closed his eyes. "For the time being. I have to make arrangements."

"It's going to be overrun with people. Are you okay with that?"

"Personally, no. In fact, it annoys me beyond comprehension, but there is nothing I can do about it. Legal law says they are not allowed within my home, and the walls are soundproof, so it is just a matter of ignoring them." However, it was still extremely inconvenient, but he supposed it was better than the less pleasant alternatives. It was a matter of 'making do' with what he had.

After all, this was the hole he dug for himself.

"I'll talk to the doctor and see what I can do." She stood up from her chair with a small sigh. "You'll still have to do physical therapy. Are you alright with that?"

"I just wish to be gone from this dreadful room."

"I'll see what I can do."

Anna walked over to the door, fingers curling over the handle and pulling before she stopped and looked back. (An unwelcome thought

bubbled up in the rattling of cell keys; still a prisoner, still a captive, *still a slave, just a different master* –)

“Will you tell me what happened, Vlad?” She asked quietly, almost so that he nearly missed it. He looked over at her, but she was staring at the floor, thinking of something that he did not have answer for. “Will you tell me what happened to you?”

“You were there after my accident –”

“No. In space. Will you tell me?”

He opened his mouth to reply, but instead he felt the words choke in his throat. There was nothing to tell her that wouldn’t scar her; that wouldn’t maim the perception of her brother that she had crafted to protect herself from the truth; that there was the definite possibility that Vlad Masters was the monster the world made him out to be.

How could he tell her the truth?

Anna took his silence for his answer, and she gave him one last, fleeting smile before slipping out the door.

“Butter Biscuits,” He swore to the empty room. And to disappointment he didn’t know he had, the silence said nothing back.

X

When I woke it was daylight and the clouds were pink.
The sun was coming up or going down I think.
We had jumped around, shouted out and howled
Going home to wash the dirt all down the sink.
X

But, to his chagrin, the nightmares followed him home.

During the day, the shadows leered at him, peering out at him with twisted faces while rounded eyes full of fear lurked at the corner of

his vision. And when it was silent in the castle, he could hear the weeping; softly carrying throughout the halls, and the screams that dogged his every step.

And at night, when the liquor lured him to an uneasy slumber, he could not escape Plasmius.

The spectre gleefully awaited for the moment he fell asleep, pouncing upon his weakness with gleeful abandon.

Plasmius grinned. “Still a slave, but just a different master. Is there truly freedom for monsters like you and I?"

But Vlad ignored him; eyes trained on the stars of his dreams, undying in all their glory.

“The world wants you dead,” Plasmius sneered. “They want you in chains and on trial for the salvation you were going to bring them. And now, seeing the kitten declawed, a former shell of a man, they think they can do something about us, about *me*.”

From here, the stars look close enough to touch. But it is a lie, it’s all a lie, and it tears out what’s left of his heart. He turns his eyes to Plasimus, who screams his rage into the sky and tears his dreams to shreds.

“There’s nothing left for you to destroy, Plasimus. You’ve taken it all.”

“But isn’t there?” The spectre returned. “You are hollow and empty, drained of all your emotions. Is it because you’ve fed them all to me? Is It because you wanted revenge as much as you wanted freedom?”

“I cannot exist without you,” Vlad told him. “Just as you cannot exist without me. We are bound, just as we are cursed.”

“Then let me out,” Plasmius whispered, voice the lingering tendrils of a dream just out of reach. “Let me out, let me out, let me out, *letmeout, letmeout, letmeoutletmeoutletmeoutletmeout – “*

X

The nights have lost their minds
and the mornings are unkind
and this the last I see of you
smash the glass to make it meaningful.
(I'm gonna drink myself to death)

X

The inevitable (and almost prophetic) reunion with Danny Phantom came when he wasn't expecting it, much to his own chagrin.

Vlad awoke with a startled gasp as fingers curled around his throat and a knee sunk itself deep into the hollow of his chest. Above him, an incandescent set of acid green stars burned angrily in the dark of his bedroom, threatening to blind him once and for all over a crime he was innocent of.

"Alright, *Plasmius,*" A voice spat, deeper than he last recalled, and yet hauntingly familiar in its verbosity, "where is she?"

He wasn't entirely ashamed to admit it, but over the years, he had fanaticized a multitude of different ways of how his inevitable reunion with Danny Fenton would enfold. Unfortunately, an ambush in the dead of night eight months (*Eight months!*) after his release from the hospital had not been very high on the list of possible scenarios.

He had expected Daniel to reach out for him earlier on, but the world had been relatively quiet from within the walls of his home as he bided his time, wasting away in the darkness of his gloomy home, but as it currently stood – b Vlad had done nothing wrong, so there was no real reason for the boy to 'pay a visit'.

Then again, thinking back on it, as the fingers tightened around his throat and green eyes burned in the dark, he supposed it was because for all of Daniel's stubbornness and sense of moral justice in the face of danger – he was never the "break and enter" type unless there was

a reason to bend the rules. But *then again*, Daniel had broken into his house more times he could count, (In fact, Danny is the very reason he had to up his security measures!), so he was always the exception to Danny's moral code it seemed.

He didn't know whether to be offended or flattered.

"Where is she, Vlad?" Danny demanded. "Where's the girl?"

The frantic note in the boy's voice roused his suspicions further. He grabbed at the bony wrist and yanked, but Daniel released the pressure only just enough to let him speak, while effectively keeping him trapped to the bed. Vlad couldn't help but grimace, thinking of the headlines that would be formulated should this ever get out. Tonight at Eleven: A twenty something year old delinquent breaks into former mayor's home to rebreak every bone in his body over a misunderstanding.

Then again, Danny Phantom was an international hero, and he was a disgraced billionaire – who thousands wanted dead – with nothing to lose, so no doubt it would be something enriching and heroically stupid, like: Superhero Ghost Boy hunts down former Arch-nemesis in middle of night to save world from dastardly plot that doesn't exist.

On that train of thought, an idea came to mind, and he decided to take the risk, having little else to lose. Either it would work and he would be freed, or Daniel would hit him across the face. He could live with either option.

"My dear boy," he practically oozed, enjoying the sight of Daniel seizing up at the sound of his voice, like some dark nightmare was crawling up his spine. "How lucky for you that its far too cold for me to sleep in the nude, or else this would be a *terrible* time for everyone involved, would it not?"

Daniel scowled. "This isn't a time to be making jokes, you ass."

"Then humor me Daniel - why have you broken into my home in the dead of night to creep into my bedroom and straddle me while asleep? Is there something you wish to tell me? Did you miss me so much that you just had to pay me a *personal visit* –"

The boy physically *cringed*, recoiling on a natural instinct, and his grip slackened in his attempt to get away. Vlad grinned, seizing his chance and struck as the boy realized his mistake, putting his weight behind the punch that threw Daniel from the bed and across the room. Without adding his ghost strength, it wasn't nearly enough as the boy got up far too quickly for his liking, but it worked well enough as it both freed him and accomplished his objective of *royally* pissing off Danny Phantom.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" The boy cursed, holding a hand to his nose that was gushing ectoplasm. A sense of joy ricocheted up his spine. He hit him harder than he thought he did.

"You attack me while sleeping; I retaliate by defending myself. Praytell, what is wrong with that?"

"Enough of the games, Plasmius! I'm only here for the girl! Now hand her over, and we can both get on with our lives."

Vlad frowned, momentarily thrown for a loop. "I haven't the faintest clue what you're going on about, Daniel. What girl? Danielle? I haven't seen the brat since we parted ways all those years ago."

A dark look crossed over the Phantom's face at the mention of the failed clone's name, but for once, he kept his mouth shut. Instead, a bright beam of energy concentrated in his fist, and he swung his arm, sending a wave of energy careening towards Vlad. He jumped out of the way, missing the blast by seconds, but it slammed into the wall instead, destroying half of his room in seconds. He sighed.

"Why must you destroy my things?"

Daniel ignored him. "What, no ghost form? Can an old man like you even take me on?"

"You've gotten cocky, I see. How strange it is that even after all this time, after everything that has happened, you are more like me than you realise."

The boy snarled, and another blast of energy was aimed his way. It was the wrong thing to say of course, but it was worth the immense

rage that distorted the youth's face. "I will *never* be like you."

"But what's to say you already aren't?"

Vlad dodged the last blast, but he wasn't able to miss the sudden fist aimed for his face as it appeared literally out of thin air. The underhanded punch threw him to the floor, and he went intangible at the last moment, slipping underneath to the rooms below, watching as the duplicate Danny had sent after him made a last grab to stop him.

He fell to the floor under his bedroom before being forced to break his fall on a bed that collapsed beneath the weight of his descent. He threw himself out of the bed just as Danny came careening after him, sending an angry burst of ice that showered the floor in razor-sharp shards. Vlad broke into a run the moment he was on his feet, and aimed for the nearest door while Danny yelled something angrily behind him. Another duplicate appeared in front of him, faster than he originally realized, but Vlad decided this was as good as any of a time to continue cheating. He went intangible once more, and he slipped through the duplicate and onto the next phase of his plan.

Which, in all reality, he was making it up as he went along. It was working out much better than he thought.

"Stop running!"

To Daniel's credit, he did stop running, but instead broke into a hover, and shot through the next several rooms. He needed to lead the boy into the "Anti-Ghost Chamber", where they could then talk like civilized –

A particle of thick ice slammed into his back, sending him off course and into a nearby wall. He physically slammed through it, taking with him several bricks of concrete and mortar before hitting with the floor and skidding across the next room. He staggered to his feet, momentarily dazed by the impact before shaking it off and forcing himself to become aware of his surroundings. Despite the less than savory way of getting there, he was right where he needed to be.

Daniel appeared before him, eyes glowing blue and looking even

more upset than he had moments ago. It was entrancing look – all rage and anger; teeth gritted and power bared; ready to destroy Vlad for a committed crime that did not exist. He shook his head to clear himself of such thoughts.

“Stop wasting my time!” The boy insisted, rearing up another attack. “Just tell me where the girl is.”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about, Daniel!”

“There’s no point in playing dumb, Vlad. We’re onto you and your dirty little schemes. You were even seen taking her, for fuck’s sake. What happened to the sneaky piece of trash that you made a fortune off of being? You’re kidnapping innocent kids, now? Why?”

Ah.

He should have expected something like this. The ambush in the middle of the night; Daniel’s pent up rage and poorly concealed fear; the immense need to *catch* and *hurt* Vlad for whatever sin he was responsible for now.

He was being framed. What a stroke of irony. He would give a genuine slow clap if not for the fact that he would using his hands to strangle the life out of whoever was behind this.

“Now, why would I kidnap children?” He asked in all seriousness. “That just doesn’t make any sense.”

“You kidnapped me! You tried multiple times!”

“Yes, *you*.” Admitting it was strange now; an admittance of what once was, of what will never be, or be again. It left an ugly taste in his mouth. “Not just any child off the block – if you haven’t noticed, I tend to *despise* most children. Why in heaven’s sake would you believe that nonsense?”

“Because –”

“Because I’m Vlad Plasmius, right?” Vlad said with a grin, feeling a creeping sense of maliciousness make a gruesome return. “Let me show you something, Daniel.”

Vlad made a run for the mahogany set of doors behind him, using his bodyweight to push them open before immediately slamming them shut behind him. Moving further from the door, he felt the tinge up his spine as the walls of the room began to activate, and he hoped that the door mechanism was still in place, or this would get ugly very quickly.

When Danny phased through moments later and immediately crashed to the floor, reverting to his human form, Vlad knew that his victory was cemented in place.

The door was designed to let ghosts in, but never out, and the walls were built from an indestructible material powered and protected by a ghost shield grid located in his lab that allowed only him to pass through unaffected. The ultimate solution to the problems of the past, but never fully called upon.

It was one of the last things he had installed before he left, and the 'Anti-Ghost Chamber' was created after he had rebuilt his lab in a similar manner following another failed attempt at capturing Danielle and Daniel. His best invention to date, and his last unfortunately.

The matter of his privacy had become an issue at that point. Between his capti – *guests* constantly escaping and the multitudes of people (although it was just usually Daniel) attempting to break into his lab, he was determined to put a stop to it. After being humiliated by the boy and his childish pranks, combined with the continual failure of kidnapping him and keeping him captive, he decided that he would upgrade to prevent that from happening. After all, there had been very little for him to lose at that point in time.

The Fenton's had had the seeds for great ideas, but he improved them. He perfected them. A ghost shield that ran on its own renewable power source could be used to power a ghost shield designed specifically to keep everything but him from passing through, and he had it up and running in less than three days after stealing the equipment he needed to create it. To his immediate surprise, the ghost shield had still been active when he had checked on it after his homecoming, but that shield was probably the only thing that kept his laboratory from getting ransacked after he left. The rest of his house, however, had been victimized. Someone had

stolen everything from his kitchen and had stolen all of his furniture. His *furniture*, for christ's sake!

"Where am I? And what did you do?" The boy demanded, attempting to summon his powers, but his hands remained empty.

"This is my 'Anti-ghost Chamber'." Vlad explained casually. "A room that only allows entities with ectoplasmic signatures to enter, but never leave. The door is rigged with a mechanism that neutralizes your ghost powers." He responded simply. "I merely leveled the playing field. I will not use my ghost powers. You will not use yours."

"Excuse me?"

Vlad wiped the dust from the front of his pajamas, although it didn't do much good. They would have to be tossed after this. "You heard me. I am not using my ghost powers –"

"But *why*?"

For a moment, Vlad debated telling him. After all, what right did Danny Fenton have to know about the brutality of his past? What right did he have to know about the things he did to survive? He debated telling anyone the truth. His existence here was already strenuous enough – what good would it do to reveal the truth? That, since the day he left Earth, he had to kill to survive? That, since he abandoned Earth for his own selfish purposes, he had repaid his debt a thousand times over in blood?

Then again, Vlad was never very good at keeping secrets from the boy.

"Plasmius is dead."

A range of emotions passed over the young boy's face. In this better light, Vlad realized that for all his stubbornness and misplaced anger, Daniel was older. He had the bones of an adult, and he was just starting to grow into his own skin. Yet, he lacked the one thing Vlad knew he always would be missing – the eyes of someone who has seen what the real world can do to a person. Even a decade later, Daniel was still painfully green at the edges.

“But you still have your powers –”

“You can make use of your powers even in human form, my boy. Haven’t you learned anything?”

Daniel snarled. “I know that you’re still an asshole. What do you want, Vlad? What do you mean ‘Plasmius is dead’? You still have your –”

“The Plasmius that you were familiar with,” Vlad began, speaking slowly as if talking to a child (which Danny was in a sort of way), “is dead. The creature that replaced him is much worse, and for all intents and purposes – I have no reason to bring him ‘out to play’, shall we say –”

“Dammit Vlad - stop with the edgelord bit!” Daniel was suddenly in front of him, grasping the front of his pajamas and pulling him down to eye level. The difference in height was almost laughable. “You’re being a damn coward! Either fight me, or tell me where the damn girl is!”

“I’ll make you a wager.” Vlad offered instead, momentarily giddy over watching a plan successfully start to fall into place. “Neither of us can use our powers, but we *will* be fighting. The first to end up on their back is the winner. If I win, you will answer me one question and then get out of my house. If you manage to land even a single hit on me, then I will answer one of the many stupid questions I know you’re *dying* to ask me.”

Oddly, Daniel released his grip and stepped away, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. “What, you *want* me to hit you? Is that what I’m hearing?”

Vlad scoffed, but he didn’t say anything.

“Well, if it means that I get to kick your ass after all these years, then I suppose it’s the worth the complete *waste* of time. You’re in, you fuckin’ fruitloop.”

“Daniel, my dear boy,” Vlad smiled, feeling oddly pleased with himself, “when will you learn when you’ve been duped?”

“What –”

And with the first real laugh he’s had in years, he hit Daniel across the face with a wide swing, knocking him back several feet. The boy stumbled, suddenly blindsided, and Vlad wasted no time in following up with another attack, bringing up a kick that arced into his chest and knocked the breath from his lungs.

In the past, he had dabbled in martial arts in order to impress Maddie. She had needed someone to practice with as Jack had been too heavy for her throw, and while he eventually regretted consenting to become the living potato sack that she tossed about for fun – it ended up coming in handy. It paved the way to allow him to build up his strength as Plasmius, finding that a hand to hand fighting style was almost as important as an ectoplasmic based one as well, even if it had fallen to the wayside overtime as he outgrew it.

No doubt Maddie would have attempted to teach her children Martial Arts, but the boy didn’t seem to have his mother’s talent (nor her ability to toss humans about like potato sacks).

On one hand though, he vaguely found himself wanting to ask Danny if Maddie had ever achieved her dream of benchpressing Jack, but he figured it was inappropriate at that current place in time.

Following his release from the hospital and the completion of his physical therapy, he was recommended several fitness programs in order to rebuild his strength, and he found himself returning to the things he found familiar. It kept his human body in shape, it was comforting, and it was something familiar that didn’t rely on his ghost powers. It could exist without ghost powers, unlike so much in his life.

But it wasn’t the same. And it would never be the same.

As much as he doesn’t want to admit it, he missed the thrill. He missed the power that came with being the monster that he had become. He missed being a ghost. There was so much to being human that he felt incapable of being, and he hadn’t been human in so long that he had begun to forget what it meant; what it was meant to mean. He felt like the hollow shell of a man, locked into the motions

of life, but they were as empty as he was.

Being a ghost made him feel complete. It made him feel as if he had finished the puzzle and the picture came together at last after a lifetime of struggling to find the last pieces.

But there was no saving Plasmius – not if he wanted to live as a human being, not if he wanted to age and eventually be freed of this miserable existence.

If he wanted to cast off the shadows of his past, then Plasmius was destined to burn in the sun, no matter how much it hurt.

When he awoke in the hospital, feeling out of his own skin, watching his own crash to Earth over and over again on a 10-inch screen, listening to the sounds of screams and murmurs of concern from strangers blind to the truth, to the reality of who he truly was – he had told himself that he would never fight again as Plasmius. That, from the day his human bones shattered upon the Earthen Soil, Plasmius was as good as dead.

In this world, where he burned all his bridges and left himself with nowhere to turn, there were so few options to choose from, and Plasmius was a sore point in all of them. After all, if they knew the truth of had really happened, they would have never let him live. Plasmius was still within him, trapped, and waiting for the moment of weakness to peak from beneath his impenetrable armor.

Daniel on the other hand, who viewed his other half as two halves of an equal whole, would never understand.

Not unless he saw what he did; went through what he did. Not until Danny Phantom became his own nightmare would Danny Fenton ever understand what it meant to be afraid of your darkest desires; to be afraid of your own self at the core. Not until he *lived it*.

Before he even knew it, he and Daniel were at each other's throats. The boy came in low with his own roundhouse kick, but missed Vlad and had to roll out of the way to dodge the resulting punch aimed for his lowered form. Vlad jumped back, circling the other halfa in a predator's dance, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Already,

the boy was out of his league – he hadn't been training his human form; not to the extent that he should have been. Sure, he was more muscular, and he had been working out, but all his energy went into maintaining and training Danny Phantom. In his human form, he was still miraculously skinny, and while his chest had filled out and his face had lost a bit of that boyish charm - Phantom was still his ace in the hole.

Speaking of Phantom, the halfa was checking the room for weak spots, looking for some sort of exit that would allow him to escape and transform. He was fighting Vlad off; rather than fighting him to win, he was focusing his mind on the impossible, and it was disappointing to say the least.

"This room was built to hold and neutralize all ghost threats within its walls, Daniel. The only way you're getting out of this is if you *fight back*."

"Why don't you just give me the girl then?" Danny argued, missing the point entirely. "I'm not here to fight!"

"You break into my home, you assault me while asleep, you accuse me of a crime that I would never commit, and then proceed to destroy what little material worth I have left in this castle. Now, the world may have changed considerably in the years I was gone, but logic leads me to believe that those actions are indeed a call for a fight."

"I –"

"If you are not here for a fight, then what are you even here for, Danny Phantom?"

"I'm here for –"

He pressed himself forward, curling his hand into a throw aimed for Danny's face. And then there, as Danny stepped back and threw his arms up to defend himself from the blow, leaving his stomach exposed, Vlad seized his moment for victory. He feinted instead and redirected his fist into the boy's diaphragm, knocking the wind from him with a gasp and sending him sprawling onto the floor.

“The girl is not here.” Vlad told him, hopefully for the last time.

“…Dirty…Trick…”

Danny wheezed pitifully, mouth gaping and chest heaving as he attempted to force air back through his lungs.

Before he rationalized it, the words were out of his mouth: “Here. Let me help you up.”

He stuck his hand out, and the boy grasped his forearm. And then Daniel yanked, using the momentum to jump to his feet and sink a knee deep into Vlad’s stomach. The attack stole the breath from his lips, and he choked, shoving Daniel back as his dinner attempted to reintroduce itself to the world.

What a dirty trick indeed.

Perhaps Daniel was more like him than they both realized. He had meant for his previous statement to be an insult, knowing that the boy would never stoop as low as he did (not with that unbreakable foundation of morals of his), but it was gratifying nonetheless to think that he played a part in the partial shattering of that bedrock of moral goodness.

“You asshole!” Danny swore, stumbling away to rest his hands on his knees to catch the rest of his breath as the adrenaline ran its course. “What the…absolute hell?”

“Didn’t your parents teach you not to swear?” Vlad asked spitefully.

“Did your parents teach you? Do you still say ‘Butter Nuts’ and ‘Fudge Buckets’?”

“I find foul language to be rude and vile behavior befitting of only hooligans and savages. I was raised with *manners*.”

Danny raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying something against my parent’s parenting skills?”

“That depends –”

A whiny crackling noise burst to life, filling the air with a tinny pitch. Danny winced and yanked the small ear bud from his ear to readjust it. After a moment of fiddling, the feedback disappeared and was replaced with a voice:

“This is Jasper to Invisiobill; I repeat, Jasper to Invisiobill, we have a situation; I repeat, we have a situation –”

“What do you want?” Danny said, irritation flitting across his face. “I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“So, this is rare because I don’t know what happened, but something happened, and I am incredibly upset that it happened because its saying that it didn’t happen even though our readings said it definitely was happening there, and I am *incredibly upset* –”

“Please just tell me –”

“Danny,” the static voice whispered. “Danny, the house is clear.”

The boy’s face dropped; a registered expression of pain flitting across his features. “No, that can’t be possible. The readings even said she was here. What could have happened –”

“Danny,” The static voice spoke up again. “The girl was never here. She was just found in her basement by her parents, out cold and missing her memories from the last twenty-four hours. Vlad didn’t take her.”

Danny, for once, was silent. “Oh.”

“Is that Jazz?” He asked with a purr, almost entirely unable (and unwilling) to help himself. “I would recognize that sunny disposition and sense of superiority almost anywhere.”

The boy sighed, ignoring Vlad much to the other’s displeasure. “I have to go, Jazz. I’ll meet you at home base. Tell Sam I’ll call her as soon as I’m done here.”

“Wait, Danny –” He tossed the busted earbud to the floor and stomped it to be pieces beneath his boot. Vlad pretended not to mind, but he was vaguely irritated that the other was continuing to make a

mess in his house.

“So, shall we continue?” Vlad asked amicably. “I believe you have a question of mine to answer.”

“Not so fast, old man. You also have to answer one of my questions.” Danny countered. “You said that if I managed ‘to land a single hit on you’, you’d answer one of *my* many stupid questions. You didn’t specify *when* I had to hit you.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Even though your attack was a cheap shot after the fight was over, I suppose you’re correct, and I indeed owe you an answer to a ‘stupid question’.”

“You can go first. Mine’s a loaded one.”

“How kind of you, letting me go first. Such a charitable deed from such a noble man. No wonder they built statues of you all over the world. Now, I have a simple question really – I am looking to get somewhere, and you might know exactly how to get there. Answer me this boy, how do you get to Clockwork’s Lair in the Ghost Zone?”

From the moment he dropped the specter’s name, Daniel’s whole expression changed. He straightened his posture, and his face tightened, looking him dead on. “How do you know Clockwork?”

“Now, here’s the funny thing – I actually do not know him, but he knows me. How positively quaint, and yet inherently suspicious is that? He visited me in my hospital room and told me several things that haven’t quite settled yet. Following my return to Earth, I have many questions, and he seems to be the one with all the answers. How do I get to his home in the Ghost Zone?”

Danny folded his arms over his chest, locking up and putting a serious expression on his face. It looked unnatural on his generally cherub face – like someone tried to paint an expression on a doll but didn’t know what it looked like. It didn’t fit, no matter which way he looked at it.

“It’s hidden in a timeless pocket outside of the ghost realm. You can’t get there unless you know where you’re going.” Daniel’s lips curled

into a deep frown before he sighed. “I’ll take you.”

Vlad couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow. “Pardon? I did not ask for a guide nor do I need one. I can take care of myself.”

“You refuse to use your ghost powers –”

“I am not refusing to ‘use them’,” Vlad interrupted. “It’s that I am choosing *not* to use them.”

“Fine, you are *choosing* not to use them, and you have no idea how to get there. I’ll take you. I might hate you with a burning passion of a thousand stars, but I honestly…. I honestly don’t feel comfortable leaving you defenseless in the ghost zone. You might think you can handle it, but there will be ghosts after your head. You nearly killed all of us.”

“Ah, self-righteous and yet caring; doing miserable tasks for the sake of another’s betterment. What a true hero.” He said with a bemused smirk, turning his back to Daniel. The moral bedrock seemed to get stronger with every break, but the boy was mistaken if he believed Vlad was not prepared for an angry mob of any sort. It was what he waited for every day – the colossal gathering of people, cheering for his head. What a fool.

He walked towards an outer wall with a single picture frame hanging upon it and twisted it to the side. He pressed his finger to the biometric scanner beneath, and the wall panel slid back, revealing an extensive set of equipment mounted on the wall. After all, an Anti-Ghost Chamber wasn’t complete without an arsenal of neutralizing equipment.

“Skulker and I had been working on a series of new weapons that would render any ghost incapacitated. As it is, it is not entirely tested nor totally safe, but nothing that a bit of tinkering can’t fix.”

“Is this what you did with your free time?” Danny asked, stepping forward and pulling an ecto-neutralizer off of the wall. The moment his eyes were cast down, his fingers running over the smooth metal, thoughts no doubt wondering what horrible injury it would have caused him – Vlad decided it was the perfect time to play dirty. With

the boy distracted, he sneakily grabbed a small device from the lower portion of the wall and slipped it into his pajama's pants pocket. There was the nagging feeling he was going to need this very soon if he wanted to get back to bed at a reasonable time.

"It is what I did with some of it. The rest of it was spent planning world domination." His attempt at a joke was not funny to Daniel, and he was moderately disappointed with the boy's response. "I should let you know that I would be well prepared for any journey I make into the other world. After all, humans can pass through without fail, and I would remain as such, making it nearly impossible for any ghost to deal me real harm. But if you insist, I suppose there's no shame in letting you lead the way. You seem familiar with him, and I am curious as how you came across him."

Danny frowned again, and he put the gun back up on the wall. "He saved me from a bad future and taught me the value of not interfering with timelines. Somethings are just meant to be."

Now he was curious. "A bad future?"

"It's….ah, a long story. A story that involves both you and me, and a dead family, but let's not talk about that for right now. Will you answer my question?"

"That depends – "

"What do you mean, it *depends* – "

"If you stop interrupting me, I will explain. In order to be ready for this trip you wish to join me on, I must make arrangements. Will you meet me here at exactly this time in one week to make the trip? I have to…run some tests, and ensure the finalization of my portal for reuse so it doesn't destroy anyone that attempts to use it. Is that an acceptable time for you?"

"At this time of night? Not really no, but I suppose it's easier that way. Do you have any particular reason why…." Daniel looked down at his watch, which was decorated with Jack Fenton's face of all things. "…2:47 in the morning is your preferred time to go traipsing through the Ghost Zone?"

“My sister is staying with me for a couple of days, and she leaves that night.” He admitted honestly. “She would be quite cross with me if she ever discovered that not only was I attempting to reenter a dangerous reality, but that I was also fraternizing with an enemy that I had swore to her I would never speak to again. But of course, you know how bad I am at keeping promises to loved ones.”

The boy’s eyes softened momentarily, as if he was remembering something fondly. The illusion broke within moments, and his face hardened over before he responded.
“I’ll be there then. You have a deal. I didn’t know you had a sister though. Is she as crazy as you are?”

The slight did not go unnoticed. “She is not. Our relationship is not public knowledge, nor do I wish it to be.”

“Understandable, given your status as ‘Public Enemy Number One’. Now that that’s out of the way…” Daniel stared up at him; blue eyes iced over in a coldness that left an ache in his bones that he did not know he had. “Will you stop skating around the issue and answer my damn question?”

He already knew it what it was; just as he knew it with every living person who spoke with him, pity making its song and dance apparent in their empathic eyes. “You may proceed, boy.”

Danny’s fist clenched automatically. “What –” He stopped; head twisting to stare at something in the far corner of the room. He let his hand fall to the side. “Fuck, what happened to you, Vlad?”

With a smile, he stepped forward, placing a singular hand on Danny’s shoulder, feeling him tense up beneath his gesture while a free hand slipped into his pocket. Unknown to the boy, there would be no answer tonight – at least, not the answer Daniel sought.

“Actions have consequences, my boy,” He said quietly, leaning his head down as loose strands escaped into his eyes, but he refused to look away. “So you spend your life running from the fallout until there is nowhere left to run. And then, when you’re left lost in the darkness of your own shadow, all that will find you is the destiny you’ve ignored that has been doomed to devour you whole. I paid for

my freedom, Daniel. I *paid it in blood*."

He brought his hand up to cup Daniel's cheek, watching as the boy's expression went through a myriad of different emotions; words silent as his voice got lost in the tall column of this throat, but the story his eyes told was in a language he could not decipher.

"Fight or die." Vlad murmured as he stroked the soft skin beneath his fingers, feeling a thousand years old, a thousand years dead. "Goodnight, Daniel."

And then he slammed the small device into Danny's chest, switching it on and backing away. The boy fell to his knees, green electricity rocking its way through his body as he attempted to stave off the shock, but soon he collapsed onto his side, passing out from the intense pain.

As Danny's eyes fluttered close, the last emotion he saw flit across those sad blue eyes looked like regret, sinking as it was dragged beneath a sea of rage.

X

The nights have lost their minds
and the mornings are unkind
and this the last I see of you
smash the glass to make it meaningful.
(I'm gonna drink myself to death)

X

Author's Note:

Part 1 of 4.

Otherwise Titled: "The Redemption Arc Nobody Really Asked For"
This is a story following the Aftermath of Vlad's

return to Earth following ten years as a slave in space. A mix of fanon headcanon and some [REDACTED] theories. Please enjoy!

EDIT [06/10/19]:

Hey guys, I plan on coming back to this story. I've rewritten a fair bit of it, and added some new scenes/content.

The reason I haven't updated is because the night I uploaded this fanfiction originally, a good friend of mine was dying in the hospital. She died the next day, and it fucked with me. It fucked with me hard, and I haven't written a damn thing since. I've only just gotten to writing the second chapter and it's been over a year. I apologise for the long delay, but I do have my reasons. Please stop sending mean messages about it, okay? Thanks C: